UNDERSTANDING ANGER

Anger is the emotional response that we have to an external or internal event perceived as a threat, a violation or an injustice. It has been widely theorized that anger is an adaptive response and is a version of the fight or flight response, which in turn is believed to have evolutionary usefulness in protecting us from danger.

THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE CYCLE

Emotions are triggered by internal (thoughts, feelings, physiological states) or external events. Such events are immediately interpreted by our thoughts (often not conscious). That interpretation then gives rise to internal neurochemical reactions. At that point we experience the emotion and we react to it either internally with more thoughts or emotions and/or externally through behavior and actions. Biological differences also mediate the reactivity to emotional triggers as well as the experience and resolution of the emotion.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ANGER

The experience of anger is learned and varies from person to person. For example, someone may cry when they feel angry while someone else may yell, while still someone else may become withdrawn, to name just a few of the ways in which anger manifests.
We usually learn how to experience and deal with anger in our families of origin. There may be families where emotions are constantly expressed regardless of the consequences, while others may not be able to tolerate any show of emotion. Also, often within families some members are allowed the expression of certain emotions, while others are not. Our biological predispositions in conjunction with the experiences we were exposed to during our crucial developmental stages establish the parameters of our emotional experience and expression, including anger.
However, all experiences of anger have the following elements in common:

- We experience what's happening as UNFAIR
- We feel HELPLESS in the moment (threatened, vulnerable, exposed/shamed, victimized, violated, inadequate or unable to meet important needs)
- We PERSONALIZE the experience ("it's being done to me" / "it's happening to me")

We all feel angry at times. Anger is part of the normal human experience. However, if we handle and express this anger inappropriately we can do harm to ourselves and/or others. Anger by itself is not destructive but how we try to cope with it can be.

ANGER STYLES

There are four basic ways in which people respond to anger:

- AGGRESSIVE (anger is externalized, "turned loose").
- PASSIVE (anger is internalized, "locked up").
- PASSIVE/AGGRESSIVE (outwardly agreeable, but showing the anger through indirect actions or sabotage).
- ASSERTIVE (anger is appropriately managed and communicated if necessary).

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Some people have particular anger style that they mostly use, but it is not uncommon for people to shift their response to anger depending on the setting and circumstances. Often people who express their anger in passive or passive/aggressive ways are in situations where the overt expression of anger might have harmful consequences.

SKILLFUL HANDLING OF ANGER

Neglecting our anger can be very harmful. Unresolved anger is damaging to our bodies, our interpersonal relationships and our own psychological well-being, because unresolved anger can leave us in a state of perpetual emotional arousal, or make us feel chronically helpless and hopeless. Acting out anger inappropriately is not attending to it and neither is turning it inward. In the short run, acting our anger out in destructive or inappropriate ways may give us the illusion of resolution by not having to tolerate such a difficult and daunting emotion. But if we make a habit of acting out we put ourselves at the mercy of our anger, letting it control us and our lives.

Guidelines to Effective Anger Management:

1. Don't make it worst by rash behavior (words or actions).

2. Respond rather than react whenever possible. This means that you may have to take a step back and slow down. When we are in the grip of anger our judgment is clouded and our perceptions are distorted. Anything that decreases reactivity and helps gain an accurate perspective of a situation empowers us. Any calming activity, such as deep breathing, will center us and make us better decision makers.

Tools to Increase Our Resilience to Anger

It is helpful to think of anger management as a tool kit with different tools to be selected to deal with different situations. The same way that we would use a hammer for a nail to hang a picture on the wall and not a wrench, and conversely a wrench for opening a pipe rather than a hammer, we need to pick and choose our anger tools to fit the situation at hand. The first step in developing this skill is by acquiring as many tools as possible. This often requires our stepping outside of our comfort zone and practicing new behaviors and new ways of thinking. The second step is choosing the most effective tool in our kit for a particular situation or challenge. And remember, not all tools work for everybody or all of the time.

The following are some helpful tools:

1. Effective stress reduction and stress management
2. Focusing on the areas in which one has control
3. Standing up for oneself in a firm, but respectful way
4. Setting appropriate limits and boundaries
5. Knowing when to let go
6. Confronting when appropriate and safe
7. Avoiding when appropriate
8. Humor
9. Physical Exercise
10. Increasing life mastery and satisfaction
11. Building on one's strengths to address life challenges
12. Realistic expectations of ourselves and others
13. Emotional and psychological healing
14. Exploring different perspectives as opposed to "tunnel vision" or rigid thinking
15. Not personalizing situations and adopting a problem-solving stance instead

DISPLACED ANGER

In some instances, chronic anger covers over other emotions that are less tolerable to a particular individual such as fear, sadness, helplessness, despair. Conversely, when the experience of anger doesn't feel tolerable it may be covered over by other more tolerable emotions or mind states such as chronic fatigue, rationalization, blame, cynicism, sadness, or helplessness.
Anger may also be an expression of other psychological conditions such as depression (especially in men), or unresolved trauma. It may also be the result of other physiological conditions like substance abuse or injury to the brain.

MYTHS ABOUT ANGER

- Ignore it and it will go away - Reality: If we have a feeling that persists and we deny it, it will manifest in other indirect, usually more harmful ways.
- Time heals all wounds - Reality: Unless emotions are resolved they will fester.
- Let it out and you'll feel better - Reality: Reactive expression of anger may provide a momentary subjective sense of relief, yet habitual blowing up harms one's physical health. In addition, habitual blowing up builds and reinforces neurological paths that make it harder to remain calm. And last but not least, relationships you want in your life such as your job, the connection with your spouse or partner, your friends, children, etc., may be destroyed by persistent displays of anger.
- If I'm not angry others will walk all over me - Reality: Anger frequently gets results in the short term, and therefore is an easy habit to develop. However, in the long term, it pushes people away and makes one lose credibility.
- I can't help it, I'm an angry person - Reality: This attitude confuses feeling and acting, leaving you at the mercy of ever-fluctuating emotions.
- It's other people and situations that make me angry - Reality: Not everybody gets angry at the same things. We make ourselves angry by the way in which we interpret events. Also, if we choose this stance, we allow circumstances outside of ourselves to control our peace of mind.

CARE Services staff are available to meet with employees who need additional assistance with issues around anger. Call for a free, confidential appointment at (510) 643-7754.

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